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ABSTRACT

An initiation ceremony which marks the passage from adolescence to adulthood in an African village is the topic of this learning module for elementary and secondary students. A reading is adapted from the autobiography of a Guinean youth who participated in the initiation experience with other boys in his village at the age of 12 years. A lesson plan, arranged in a question-answer format, directs the students to investigate the psychological impact of the initiation ceremony, the attitude of missionaries and colonial authorities in Africa toward such ceremonies, the essential elements common to all initiation rites, and the existence of similar initiation ceremonies in Western society. Detailed answers to all questions are provided. Students also discuss recognition of the signal of when a man or woman attains adulthood. For example, initiation from childhood to adulthood is accomplished in some cultures by reaching a certain age, participating in a religious ceremony, graduating from high school, moving away from home, and supporting oneself financially. Three enrichment activities dealing with American and African adolescence and African initiation ceremonies are suggested. Five books on African children, religions, and philosophies are listed. (Author/DB)

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THE INITIATION EXPERIENCE : RECOGNITION OF ADULTHOOD

When he was about 12 years old, Camara Laye joined the society of the uninitiated in his home town in Guinea. Though he had already completed Koranic school (where Muslims learn to read and pray using their holy book, the Koran) and was attending a French school for his "western" learning, he felt his education lacking unless he studied the history and traditions of his people.

Below are excerpts from Laye's autobiobraphy* which describe his induction into the initiation school.

> "I was growing up. The time had come for me to join the society of the uninitiated. This rather mysterious society--....-contained all the young boys, all the uncircumcised of twelve, thirteen or fourteen years of age, and it was run by our elders, whom we called the big 'Kondéns'. I joined it one evening before the feast of Ramadan."

> "As soon as the sun had gone down, the tom-tom had begun to beat. Even though it was being played in a remote part of the compounds, the notes had roused me at once, had struck my breast, had struck right at my heart, just as if Kodoké, our best player, had been playing for me alone. A little later, I had heard faintly the shrill voices of the boys accompanying the tom-tom with their cries and singing....Yes, the time had come for me..."

> "The...crowd that surrounded Kodoké and his tom-tom was getting nearer, It was going from one compound to another; it would stop for a moment in each compound where there was a boy of an age, as I was, to join in the society, and it would take the boy away. That is why it was so slow in coming, yet so sure, so ineluctable; as sure, as ineluctable as the fate that awaited me."

> "What fate? My meeting with Kondén Diara. Now I was not unaware who Kondén Diara was: often my mother, and at times, my uncles, had talked of him only too much, had threatened me only too often with Kondén Diara, that terrible bogeyman, that "lion that eats up little boys." And here was Kondén Diara--but was he a man? Was he an animal? Was he not rather half-man and half-animal? My friend Kouyaté believed he was more man than beast -- here was Kondén Diara leaving the dim world of hearsay, here he was taking on flesh and blood, yes, and was prowling, roused by Kodoké's tom-tom, around the dark town! This night was to be the night of Kondén Diara."

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*Camara Laye. The African Child. Fontana Books. 1955. Farrar, Straus & Giroux Inc., 19 Union Square W., New York, 10003

"..... I was standing at the entrance to the compound, waiting. I, too, was holding, ready to play it, my coro, with the stick clutched nervously in my hand; I was waiting, hidden by the shadow of the house, I was waiting, filled with a dreadful anxiety, my eyes searching the blackness."

"... I ran quickly into the yard, and, standing in the middle of it, I awaited with as much pluck as I could muster, the awful invasion. I did not have long to wait: the crowd was upon me, it was spreading tumultuously all round me, overwhelming me with shouts and cries and beating tom-toms, beating drums. It formed a circle and I found myself in the centre, alone, curiously isolated, still free and yet already captive. Inside the circle, I recognised Kouyate and others, many of them friends of mine who had been collected as the crowd moved on, collected as I was to be, as I already was: and it seemed to me they were none of them looking very happy -- but was I any more than they were? I began to beat my coro, as they were doing; perhaps I was beating it with less confidence than they."

"I, too, mingled my voice with those of the uncircumcised boys. When, having formed a circle again, the crowd left our compound, I went with it, almost willingly, beating my coro with great enthusiasm. Kouyate was on my right."

"Towards the middle of the night, our tour of the town and the collection of uncircumcised boys was finished: we had arrived at the farthest outskirts of the compounds, and in front of us lay only the dark scrub-land. Here the women and young girls left us; then the grown men left us. We were alone with the older boys, or should I say 'delivered over' to the older boys--for I remember the often rather disagreeable natures and rarely pleasant manners of those older ones."

(The older boys then led the younger ones into a clearing where a great fire was burning. Then the uninitiated knelt, and hid their eyes while Kondén Diara and his cohorts 'roared' the opening of the ceremonies. Since the young boys could not see anything but knew they were surrounded by the loud, terrifying noises they were quite shaken by the experience. When the roaring stopped, they were allowed to look up.)

"... I heave a sigh of relief. This time, it's really over. We look at one another: ... Yes, we were afraid. We were not able to conceal our fear..."

"A new command rang out, and we sat down in front of the fire. Now our elders begin our initiation; all night long they will teach us the songs of the uncircumcised; and we must remain quite still, repeating the words after them, singing the melody after them; there we sit, as if we were in school again, attentive, very attentive and very obedient."

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"Our lessons ended with the dawn.. ...Looking round me, I could not understand why I shook with fear during the night: the first rays of dawn were falling so gently, so reassuringly, on the bombax tree, on the clearing; the sky looked so pure! Who could believe that only a few hours ago a whole herd of lions, led by Kondén Diara himself, had been angrily roaring among these tall reeds and grasses, separated from us only by a wood fire which now was almost dead? No one would have believed it, and I should have doubted the evidence of my own ears and thought I was waking up from a bad dream, if one or the other of my companions had not now and then cast a suspicious glance at the tallest grasses."

"...I had not time to wonder very long at this: our elders were re-grouping us; and because the majority were almost walking in their sleep, the operation was carried out not without difficulty, not without shouts and some rough treatment. Finally we started off back to the town singing our new songs, and we sang them with unbelievably care-free abandon: even so the steed that scents the approaching stable suddenly quickens his pace, however weary he may be. When we reached the first compound, the presence of the long white threads (which hung from the bombax tree) struck me...: all the principal houses bore these threads on the summit of the roof. 'Do you see those white threads?', I said to Kouyaté. 'I can see them. They are always there after the ceremony in the clearing'.

"'That's where they come from', I said, pointing to the distant bombax tree. 'Someone must have climed up'.

'We had reached the main square of the town. I stared in amazement at the bombax trees of the market-place: they too, were ornamented with the same white threads. All but the humblest houses, indeed, and all the big trees were tied to one another by these white threads, whose focal point was the enormous bombax tree in the clearing, the sacred place marked by the bombax tree."

"...The night of Kondén Diara was a strange night, a terrible and miraculous night, a night that passed all understanding. As on the previous evening, we went from one compound to another, preceded by tom-toms and drums, and our companions left one another as they reached their homes. Whenever we passed a compound where someone whose courage had failed him had refused to join us, a mocking chant rose from our ranks. I got back to our compound, completely exhausted, but very satisfied with myself: I had taken part in the ceremony of the lions! Even if I had not put up much of a show when Kondén Diara was roaring, that was my own affair; I could keep that to myself. I passed triumphantly over the threshold of our dwelling place."

"Later I got to know who Kondén Diara was, and I learnt also that the dangers were non-existent. But I only learnt these things when the time had come for me to learn them. As long as we are not circumcised, as long as we have not attained that second life that is our true existence, we are told nothing and we can find out nothing..."

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SCHOOL SERVICES DIVISION

THE INITIATION EXPERIENCE : WHEN DOES A CHILD BECOME A MAN/WOMAN?

- LESSON PLAN -

Most people view adolescence as the transition from childhood to adulthood. In Africa it is the occasion for special, intensive training in preparation for adult status in the community. During adolescence the body matures physically. This signals the time to move from childhood to adulthood socially and in religious terms. Boys and girls learn the behaviour, rights and responsibilities, privileges and duties necessary for a well-rounded adult.

In Africa, each ethnic group has its own way of "initiating" its young into full status in the community. Despite the variations, there are commonalities. Parts of the rites are secret and known only to those who have experienced them. They signify a rebirth. The occasion is almost always accompanied by pomp and circumstance. The experience of initiation is required for full acceptance into the adult community. The reading attached, adapted from Camara Laye's autobiography, describes one youngster's initiation experience.

1. Some anthropologists assert that initiation rites have three essential elements: a) a symbolic death or removal from the old life; b) the induction/education into the new life; c) a rebirth or re-entry into the community.

a) How are these requirements included in Laye's initial experience?

a) Leaves home and family to go to school; learns new songs and lessons; learns to obey, to endure hardship. Procession to the homes in the morning.

b) Why are such elements important?

b) Symbolize introduction to communal life and adult life; bond with other initiates persists.

c) Circumcision is an integral part of most African initiation ceremonies. What does it symbolize?

c) Attainment of sexual maturity; the approval to procreate and assure continuation of ethnic group.

2. What important psychological impact does the ceremony have?	2. Lack of knowledge of the ceremony promotes a sense of seriousness and awe. The boys are very frightened but they are together in a miniature community, thus increasing the solidarity of the group participating. The rejoicing at the end is also shared. The whole experience is geared to encourage a sense of community.
3. a) Do we have similar initiation ceremonies?	a) No - not on a "national" basis. Yes - religious: Bar Mitzvah, Confirmation, "hazing" in high school, college, and club entry. N.B. Students might enjoy examining one of these in detail and classifying its components as an anthropologist might.
4. During Colonial times, governments and missionaires often tried to outlaw initiation rites.	
a) Why might these two groups oppose such ceremonies?	a) Governments: secret rituals could become meetings for people dissatisfied with the government. Missionaries: rites were integral parts of the religions they were trying to undermine. Both: such rites reaffirm people's commitment to their own, not the "new" values.
b) Why are such ceremonies so important to the cultures that practice them?	b) Ceremonies include the passing of history and beliefs to the new generation. If not performed, the very underpinnings of the culture are threatened.
Summary: When does a child become a man/woman?	Law recognizes certain age as attainment of "majority status". Religions often celebrate adulthood ceremoniously: graduation from high school; moving away from home; supporting oneself financially, etc.

Enrichment:

1. Debate the following proposition: In the United States adolescence has become more an extension of childhood than a preparatory stage to adulthood.

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Enrichment (continued)

2. Have students create and conduct an initiation ceremony which would be appropriate for an American teenager coming of age in the 1970's.

3. Students might enjoy examining some African initiation ceremonies in depth. In a library, they might research the Poro and Sande (women's group) in West Africa, the Kikuyu and Chagga in East Africa, or others. (See Bibliography).

* * *

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